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ABSTRACT

In 1999 the Texas Legislature provided for the creation of the Master Reading Teacher (MRT) Certificate to address several issues. MRTs primary duties are to: serve as reading teachers; consult with and mentor other teachers; and provide research-based information and training. In September 2001 the Texas Education Agency asked Dr. Jan Hasbrouck to conduct an evaluation of MRT training that occurred during the 2000-2001 academic year. There were five evaluation questions, but this paper discusses only two questions: To what extent have changes in service delivery due to MRT training had a positive effect on student standardized reading test scores (both for students directly taught by MRT program graduates and for students indirectly influenced by MRT program graduates); and From perceptions of both administrators and MRTs, what are the MRT program's greatest strengths and weaknesses? The paper states that the evaluation consisted of four activities: (1) statewide mail survey of all MRTs currently receiving the state stipend for MRTs serving on "high-need" campuses; (2) mail survey of the administrators of MRTs drawing a state stipend; (3) telephone follow-up survey of selected MRTs and administrators; and (4) Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS, the criterion referenced tests required of Texas public school students from the third-tenth grade) data collection by selected administrators. According to the paper, evaluators gained the impression of a moderately strong beginning of the MRT program, but a beginning that fell short of its potential. With better networking and improved guidelines on program implementation, the prediction is for stronger programs. (NKA)

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PROMISE FOR THE FUTURE: AN EVALUATION OF THE TEXAS MASTER READING TEACHER PROGRAM

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Background

In 1999, the Texas Legislature provided for the creation of the Master Reading Teacher (MRT) Certificate to address several issues. The MRT certification program was developed as part of the Texas Reading Initiative to help all students

- Read on level by the end of the 3rd grade
- Increase their reading knowledge and skills throughout their school careers
- Receive instruction from highly qualified teachers

The MRT'S primary duties are to:

- Serve as a reading teacher
- Consult with and mentor other teachers
- Provide research-based information and training

Review of the Literature

A growing body of research indicates that many reading difficulties are preventable if students receive support and intervention, especially early intervention (Allington & Cunningham, 2002; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Torgesen et al., 1999). Developing and supporting teacher expertise is a key element in reading success. Training and support for teachers directly involved in delivery of instruction is vital to develop, support, and maintain this level of teaching expertise. The U.S. Department of Education has listed several key similarities among successful reading programs, including effective staff development for teachers and a significant amount of time spent on basic instruction (Turnbull, Welsh, Heid, Davis, & Ratnofsky, 1999).

In a time of increased school accountability, teacher recruitment and retention issues, and increased diversity in public schools, the Texas MRT model is specifically designed to support

student learning and teacher needs. Early evaluation of the implementation of this model is beneficial to other educators, state education agencies, and educational policymakers as they consider similar programs. This paper presents the results of a State-initiated evaluation of the impact of MRTs on student performance.

Evaluation Questions

In September 2001 the Texas Education Agency (TEA) asked Jan E. Hasbrouck, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Educational Psychology, Texas A&M University (TAMU), to conduct an evaluation of MRT training that occurred during the 2000-2001 academic year. The evaluation was to answer four questions, and the evaluation team added a fifth. However, this paper discusses only the following two questions:

1. To what extent have changes in service delivery due to MRT training had a positive effect on student standardized reading test scores (both for students directly taught by the MRT program graduate and for students indirectly influenced by the MRT program graduate).
2. From perceptions of both administrators and MRTs, what are the MRT program's greatest strengths and weaknesses?

Method

The evaluation consisted of four separate activities:

1. Statewide mail survey of all MRTs who are currently receiving the State stipend for MRTs serving on "high-need" campuses.
2. Mail survey of the administrators of MRTs drawing a State stipend.
3. Telephone follow-up survey of selected MRTs and administrators.

4. Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS, the Texas criterion referenced tests required of Texas public school students from the 3rd to the 10th grade) data collection by selected administrators.

Mail Survey

Texas offered State stipends of $5,000 annually for three years (fall, 2000 – spring, 2003) to teachers who serve as MRTs on one of the more than 1800 campuses identified by the TEA as "high-need" campuses. By January 2002 the Texas State Board for Educator Certification had certified 828 MRTs statewide; 263 of these MRTs were eligible for State "high-need" campus stipends. District, campus, and MRTs' names for only these 263 "high-needs" MRTs were available, so these individuals and their administrators constituted the sample for the evaluation.

Follow-up Telephone Survey

In the teacher mail survey teachers were asked if they would participate in a follow-up telephone survey. Twenty-five MRTs were selected at random from among those who volunteered to participate in a follow-up survey. In addition, 25 administrators were selected at random from among administrator respondents to participate in the follow-up.

TAAS Data Collection by Selected Administrators

The administrator mail survey asked administrators if they would provide certain TAAS data from their campus. Those who indicated they would provide these data were contacted and given additional information and data reporting sheets.

Procedure

Mail surveys. In April 2002 the team mailed surveys to 263 teachers and 245 administrators. A total of 198 teachers (75.3% response rate) and 159 administrators (64.9% response rate) responded to the mail questionnaires.

Follow-up telephone survey. Responses to mail surveys were analyzed, and a short questionnaire was formulated to further probe topics that seemed to generate special interest among both teachers and administrators. Over a period of several weeks 18 administrators and 24 teachers from 40 campuses were administered the questionnaire by way of an individual telephone interview.

TAAS data collection by selected administrators. Administrators who indicated in their mail survey that they were willing to provide TAAS data received a form that asked for the individual student and class TAAS performance data that is provided in the TEA reports to the schools. Ten administrators responded with TAAS data.

Results Summary

Evaluation question 1: To what extent have changes in service delivery due to MRT training had a positive effect on student reading scores (both for students directly taught by the MRT graduate and for students indirectly influenced by the MRT graduate).

Survey Data

A fair evaluation of the MRT program by student reading scores at this time was considered to be problematic by a majority (63% of item respondents) of administrators. On whether TAAS scores could now be used to fairly evaluate the MRT program, administrators were evenly split, 50% "Yes" and 50% "No."

Ninety-nine administrators provided 133 reasons why the MRT program could not yet be fairly evaluated: 40% noted that the program was too new to evaluate, 29% noted that the MRT program had been only partially implemented, and 23% felt they had insufficient student data for a fair evaluation. Finally, 20% noted that the MRT program began at the same time as other innovations, so its effects could not be fairly isolated.

Despite this hesitancy for an early MRT program evaluation based on student scores, both administrators and MRTs expressed a widespread perception that the MRT on campus had a positive effect on student Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI) and TAAS scores. When administrators were asked specifically whether TPRI or TAAS scores had increased due to MRT direct teaching, 71% of item respondents said, "Yes," and only 29% said "No." When asked by how much these scores improved, 57% of item respondents reported "up to 10 points improvement in scores (on TPRI and/or TAAS)," an additional 19% reported "up to 20 points improvement in scores," and an additional 13% reported great gains of "up to 30 points improvement in scores."

Administrators were also asked about TPRI or TAAS score increases due to indirect MRT support (enhancing instruction by others). Responses to this question closely mirrored those for MRT direct teaching.

TAAS Data from Administrators

Administrators were asked in the survey if they would provide TAAS data from their school from 2001 and 2002. A number of administrators replied in the affirmative, and administrators provided data on the TAAS reading performance of 139 students in 2001 (before they were instructed by an MRT) and in 2002 (after they had been instructed by an MRT), e.g., grade 3 in 2001 and grade 4 in 2002.

Individual student data (not aggregated). Student skill growth may be viewed at the individual student level or at the aggregate school level. First are presented individual student growth data. (Graph 1) TAAS reading scores averaged for all 139 students increased 5.5 percentage points from 73.9 Texas Learning Index (TLI) score to 79.4 TLI. The range of the

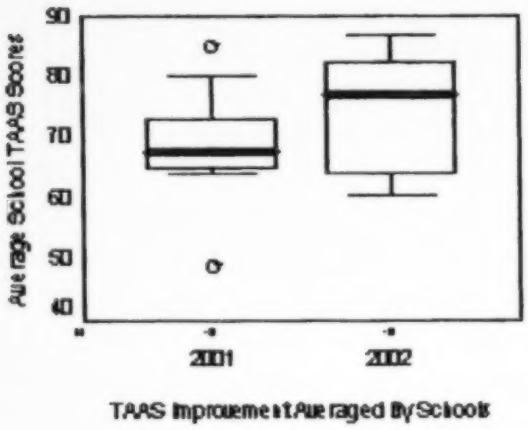
gains was 83, from –30 to +53. There were 102 increased scores and 32 decreased scores; five scores stayed the same from one exam administration to the next.

TAAS Score Improvement By Individual Student Sampled

This box plot shows the increase in the median score, 25th, and 75th percentile scores, from 2001-2002.

Of the 139 students in the reported sample, the number meeting minimum TAAS standards increased by 23, from 93 in 2001 to 116 in 2002. The number of students mastering all objectives rose by 13, from 28 in 2001 to 41 in 2002.

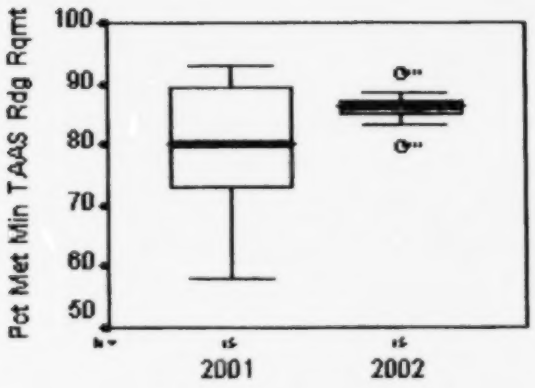
Performance aggregated by school. (Graph 2). The performance changes in the individual TAAS score sample averaged by school ranged from –5.5 percentage points to +14 percentage points. (NOTE: The number of students reported per school ranged from 2 to 51 with an average of 14.) So, although the presence of an MRT may have had a positive effect on TAAS reading scores in most cases, it was not true for all schools.



TAAS Improvement Averaged By Schools

The box plot shows that average school aggregate median score and 75th %ile ranks improved by approximately 10 TLI score points. However, 25th %ile ranks stayed about the same, and 10th percentile ranks dropped in TAAS performance. In other words, the growth seen for middle and high performing students was not evident for the lowest 25% of students. This uneven growth for high vs. medium and low performers caused a spreading out of the score distribution in year 2002.

Nine administrators provided data on 15 pairs of classes that showed the percentage of students meeting minimum expectations on the 2001 TAAS reading in one grade and the percentage of students meeting minimum expectations on the 2002 TAAS reading in the next higher grade, e.g., grade 3 in 2001 and grade 4 in 2002. (Graph 3) The average increase in passing rates was 10.9%, from 79.8% to 90.7%. Statewide the percentage of students passing the TAAS reading increased by 1.4%, from 88.9% to 91.3%. Therefore, the students in this sample of classes improved by a greater percentage than the State average. The range of sample class score changes was 32, from –4 (one case of a lower percentage of students passing) to +28 percent. The box plot below shows the increased median level of percentage of students meeting minimum expectations in TAAS reading, as well as the reduced range of scores from 2001-2002.



Met Min TAAS Rdg Rqmt 2001-2002

The reader is cautioned that this grade-to-grade comparison does not imply that the data represent exactly the same cohorts in both 2001 and 2002. The groups of students going from one grade in 2001 to another grade in 2002 undoubtedly changed. However, many of the same students would continue in the same school from one year to the next and would be represented in the data for both 2001 and 2002.

Supplemental Evaluation Question 5: According to both administrators and MRTs, what are the MRT program's greatest strengths and weaknesses?

Administrators and MRTs were asked similar questions, both in open-ended write-in format. Administrators were asked to identify two or three aspects of their MRT program which were strengths and two or three areas of needed improvement. MRTs were asked for two or three things about the program they liked most, and two or three suggestions for improvement.

MRTs volunteered 12 different strengths that were shared by multiple respondents (and 22 others unique to individual respondents). The top four strengths were each listed by at least 38 respondents. They are (in order of descending popularity): a) Professional development, b)

Opportunity to collaborate with others, c) Positively impacting student learning, and d) Mentoring/Consulting with peers.

MRTs volunteered 10 different improvement needs shared by multiple respondents (and 25 others unique to individual respondents). The top four improvement needs were each listed by at least 39 respondents. They are (in order of descending popularity): a) Improved time scheduling, b) Ongoing training, c) Networking, and d) Better definition of the MRT role.

Administrators volunteered a total of 10 different strengths of the MRT program, of which all but one were listed by multiple respondents. The most popular four strengths were each listed by at least 33 respondents. They are (in descending order of popularity): a) Expertise in mentoring/consulting, b) Having an additional campus resource, c) Support and training for new teachers, d) Having an additional support for students.

Administrators also suggested a total of 29 different improvement needs for the MRT program, of which only 10 were listed by multiple respondents. Of these 10 suggestions, the 5 most popular were each listed by at least 14 respondents. These 5 improvement ideas are (in descending order of popularity): a) Continue and expand funding (stipends, release time, curriculum materials, staffing allocations, etc.), b) Structure more flexible scheduling and release time, c) Clarify the MRT role, d) Train administrators as well as MRTs, e) Continued training of the MRT.

Conclusion

This evaluation of the MRT program relied on data that were descriptive in nature, and the design was correlational, which disallows causal inferencing from TAAS data. Added to these limitations was the relatively small sample of schools and students for whom TAAS data were reported by administrators. Further reducing our ability to make causal inferences between

the MRT program and student reading gains was the fact that other reading improvement efforts began in several schools at the same time as the MRT program. It is therefore not possible to state that MRTs caused improvements in TAAS reading performance in the reporting schools. However, the combination of the TAAS scores reported here, the survey responses by administrators and teachers, and the follow-up phone interviews caused these evaluators to believe that MRTs were having positive effects.

There were common program start-up problems, including perceived lack of direction and guidelines, and lack of time and flexibility within the school day for the MRTs to carry out the various roles for which they were trained. However, an overall image of four types of positive MRT effects pervaded this evaluation study.

The first positive effect was upon the MRTs themselves. The training and some new role-related freedom were professionally invigorating for several. Though too challenging for a few, and somewhat frustrating for several, the overall impression was one of professional growth toward a new challenge and a desire for more training.

The second positive effect was upon colleagues in the MRTs' schools. Because other teachers were not directly interviewed or surveyed, this positive effect must be conjectured in part. However, perceptions by most administrators tended to agree with those of the MRTs—that positive effects on colleagues were common. In-servicing, professional advice/consultation, and mentoring of new teachers commonly occurred and was appreciated by most administrators.

The third positive effect was upon the reading program (broadly defined) within the schools. Administrators noted a new energy or focus to reading, more training activity, and a sense of higher priority for reading. They also noted that this focus cut across the dyslexia/special/general education divides. Though perception of this positive effect was

widespread, it is difficult to attribute it to the MRT role alone. We can only conclude that the MRT role was perceived as an important element in a new or stronger or clearer focus on reading instruction.

The fourth and final positive effect was upon student TAAS scores. As with the previous effect, this fourth effect cannot be readily attributed to the MRT program alone. Other, concurrent improvements commonly accompanied the MRT role, as one might hope for when undertaking thoughtful, integrative, school-wide change. In addition, it needs to be noted that student improvement was not universal—most, but not all, schools improved in student TAAS scores.

In a most general sense, the evaluators gained the impression of a moderately strong beginning for the MRT program, but a beginning that fell short of meeting its potential. Individual MRTs felt themselves relatively isolated from their peers and without clear direction for their role. Administrators felt a lack of direction as well. Given better opportunity for networking, and for learning from model programs, and improved guidelines on program implementation, and another year of "settling in", we predict stronger programs from which evaluators could reliably document student reading score improvement within an appropriate comparison design.

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